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Miles - Sermon - 1839

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A
S E R M O N

DELIVERED AT THE

South Congregational Church in Lowell,

ON THE

SABBATH FOLLOWING THE FUNERAL

OF THE

HON. LUTHER LAWRENCE,

WHO DIED APRIL 17, 1839.

BY HENRY A. ^{Adolphus} MILES.

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THE FOLLOWING SERMON, PREPARED BY NECESSITY IN HASTE,
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BY THE AUTHOR.

SERMON.

MATHEW xxiv. 44.

"THEREFORE BE YE ALSO READY, FOR IN SUCH AN HOUR AS YE
THINK NOT THE SON OF MAN COMETH."

How dark and inscrutable are, at times, the visitations of Providence! The events which for the most part make up the experience of life, it seems to us that we can explain. We can understand their meaning and their purpose. We rejoice that we can do this, that beneath most of the changes of life the intentions of the divine will reveal themselves, their wise, and kind, and gracious design we can see.

But lo! these are but a part of his ways. There is another large class which are not

level to our comprehension. They are shrouded in darkness which no human eyes can pierce. Even the loving and trusting heart will sometimes exclaim, "why dealeth the Father after *this* manner with his children?" But no voice replies, no light breaks forth, all human wisdom is vain, all inquiry is baffled.

And there, in their impenetrable mystery, these events we must leave. The reasons of them are concealed in the secret councils of the divine will, and man never appears so presumptuous as when he tries to fathom them. They are unsearchable and past finding out. What he does we know not now, but shall know hereafter.

Let not such reflections as these, however, give us any gloomy thoughts of the government of our Heavenly Parent. They ought not to have this effect. To a seriously considerate mind they will not have this effect. The government of our Heavenly Father is, even in the point now referred to, precisely like the government of an earthly Father, who, though ever so affectionate, must, if

he be wise, continually do what his child cannot explain, what may perhaps sometimes appear to be unreasonable and harsh. What then the earthly parent does, his child knows not now, but will know hereafter. So is it with the Supreme Parent of all. He makes his appeal from our present ignorance, to future light. We must humbly wait for that light, to interpret the scenes through which we are here passing. And when the time comes for us to look upon them no longer through a glass darkly, we shall see the most important connexion between events, which, to the eye of sense and mortality, seemed in no wise related. What was once dark will then be made clear. That which appeared to stand out by itself, a dispensation of unmixed grief, suffering, and evil, we shall see to be but one subordinate movement in a vast system of beneficence and love. The wisdom and goodness of God will be justified, in what were the darkest and most fearful passages of life.

Meanwhile let us learn the great lesson of trust :—"Wait the great teacher Death, and God adore." Without anxious questionings let us leave the sudden, startling events of God's Providence just where he has left them—shrouded in the mystery of His ways whose foot-steps are in the deep.

But when these sudden and startling events fall among us with that awful surprise which makes the face of the boldest grow pale, and the hands of the strongest tremble, there are serious thoughts which will be awakened in all hearts, from which a wise and good man will not turn away, until they have blessed him. And if we may not say that these are the purposes for which God sends them, we may at least say that these are the uses that man should make of them—by them to realize the uncertainty of his life, and to feel the need of a continual readiness for the day of his death.

In such an hour as ye think not the son of man cometh. These words have ever been sounding in our ears. The truth they contain

we know, we know it well. And yet what a fearful thing it is to have it brought home as a reality to our hearts ! Brethren, I am sure I am but repeating what ye yourselves have felt, that we deceive ourselves with a feeling of false security. The sun daily rises and sets for us. We are strong to go forth to our daily toil, we lay our plans for the far-reaching future, as if we were never to be moved.— We think not on what a brink we every moment stand, what one brief instant has done for others, what at any time it may do for us. And when death does come, as it were before our eyes, and at our very side, how are we startled and alarmed, awakened from our dream, and made to feel what our own liability is to an instantaneous end !

I plead for nothing, my friends, beyond the dictates of a sober truth. I forget not that sudden mortality is not God's usual method of withdrawing the gift of life. I know that, in the common course of his Providence, he gives us warnings of his will. Thanks be to his name that he does. Let us praise him for

the blessed ministry of sickness, which, beside affording intimations of our departure, and tending to make us feel resigned, eases the blow of separation to the hearts of friends, which, falling at once, would smite them prostrate to the dust.

But, notwithstanding this, death does come, and often come—ye who hear me know it, and this whole community knows it—without the least forewarning note of his approach. And therefore let us act the part of wise men and take this fact into serious account. Let it break up that unreflecting, false security into which we are so prone to slide. Let us remember that in the scenes of our daily walk, and most familiar business, dangers may lurk, and death may lie in wait for us ; and that though we live under a Providence without whose care not even a sparrow falleth to the ground, yet it may be the will of that Providence to take us, as it hath taken others, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

No one of us, my friends, no one of us realizes how solemn is this truth. Not even in

those first moments of surprise, when tidings of what God had so suddenly done startled us with fear, when the very ground we walked upon seemed insecure beneath our feet, and we felt "what shadows we are, and what shadows we pursue," not even then did we realize how full of awe is the situation in which we every moment stand. It is not mere *death* that makes it so. It is not the leaving forever these scenes, nor the parting forever from these friends. It is the mysterious unfoldings of eternity; it is that we stand on the shore of that boundless world into whose dread abyss no human eye can cast one glance—just for one moment lingering, and trembling on its brink.

An impression of the uncertainty of life is not, however, the only lesson which the sudden and surprising events of God's providence should teach us. A mere feeling of insecurity may only alarm and weaken the mind without lifting it up to one high purpose and resolve. It should be directed to some wise, serious, and practical end Ac

cordingly our text adds—be ye therefore ready. And this is the practical lesson to which these reflections should lead us, and which the startling events of life, in their own impressive language, should enforce upon us—readiness for that sure coming but uncertain hour, readiness for that summons which will admit of no delay, will give ear to no entreaty, will be put by by no promise, and may not grant us one single moment for thought.

But preparation for that hour, who can tell how it may be made? No man can say for his brother. We must each search and see for ourselves. And as I do but repeat the lesson which God himself, in his most holy Providence, preaches to us, I will speak to you, brethren, with that directness of speech, which man may use to man. And I pray you to ask your own hearts, if that hour should come upon you as a thief in the night, would it find *you* prepared? Brethren, we each do know something of our hearts, their infirmities and sins. We know where we are

shunning duty, where we are yielding to allurements to wrong, where we are placing our supreme affections upon objects which one moment may turn to dust and ashes. By the solemn events of God's Providence I pray you to look at these things. I will plead with you for a juster estimate of the concerns of this short and uncertain life. I will remind you that those objects cannot be worthy of your highest regard, which this very day you may be summoned to leave. I will ask you to guide your daily life by those serious impressions that are drawn from that other world, to the very verge and almost sight of which, it seems that we have been brought. I will exhort you to seek first those things which will soon be all things to you—duty well performed, temptations resisted and overcome, and the work, which the Father hath given you to do, ever going on in you, in love, and trust and holy fear.

Come then the last hour *when* God pleases and *as* God pleases. Our hearts shall not condemn us; and He who is greater than

our hearts will give us peace and assurance forever.

To the events of the last few days I hardly dare trust myself to allude. They have come upon us with such overwhelming suddenness that we feel like saying—The Lord hath passed before us. Be still.

That the honored form, which, only one week since, was bowed reverently in worship in this Temple, is now the tenant of a distant tomb—how affecting beyond our power to express!

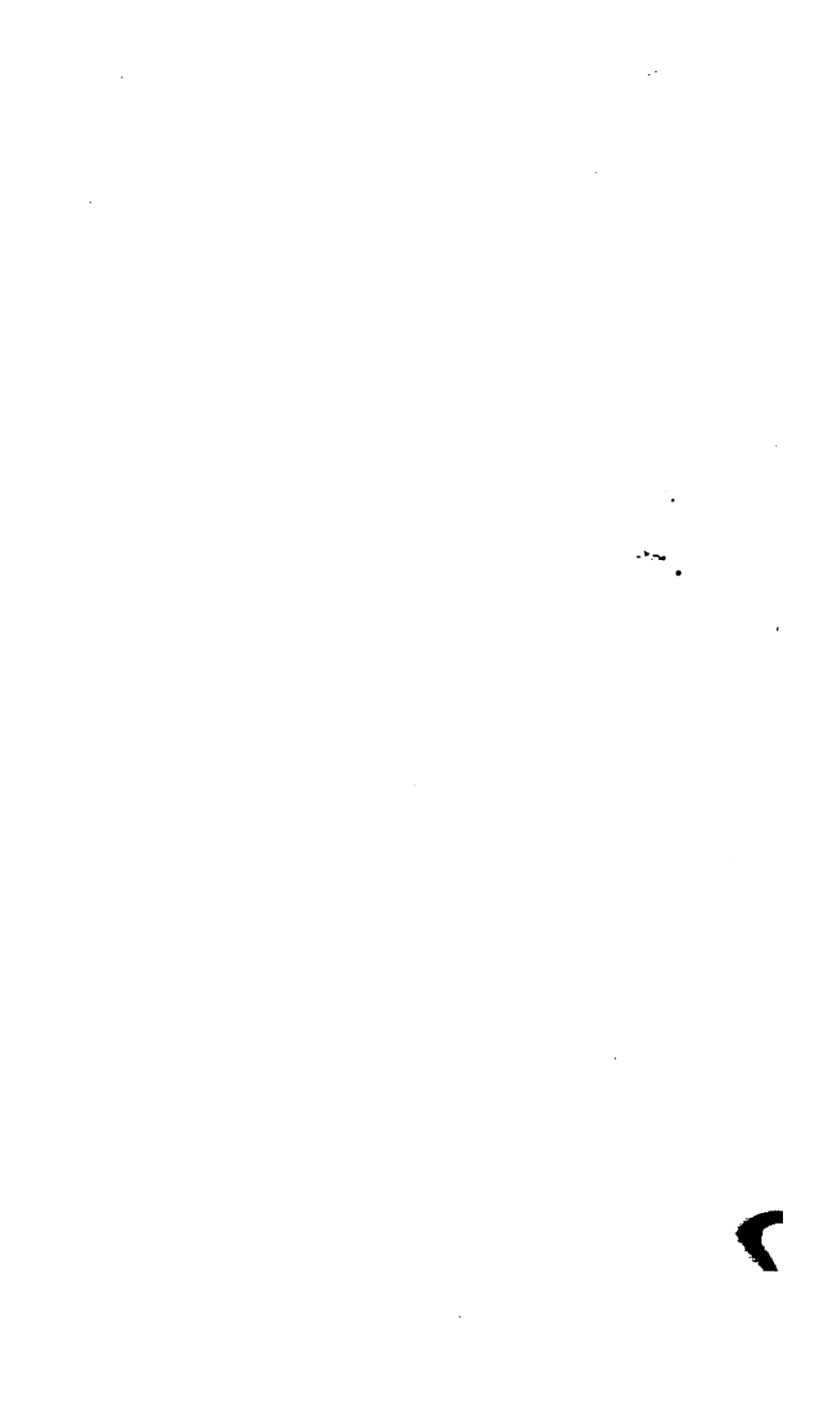
And now although so many of us have been witnesses of the mournful scenes which an event like this occasions, and have paid the last tribute of respect to his mortal remains, yet how hard it is to realize that we shall here see him no more, and that the places that have known him will know him no more forever.

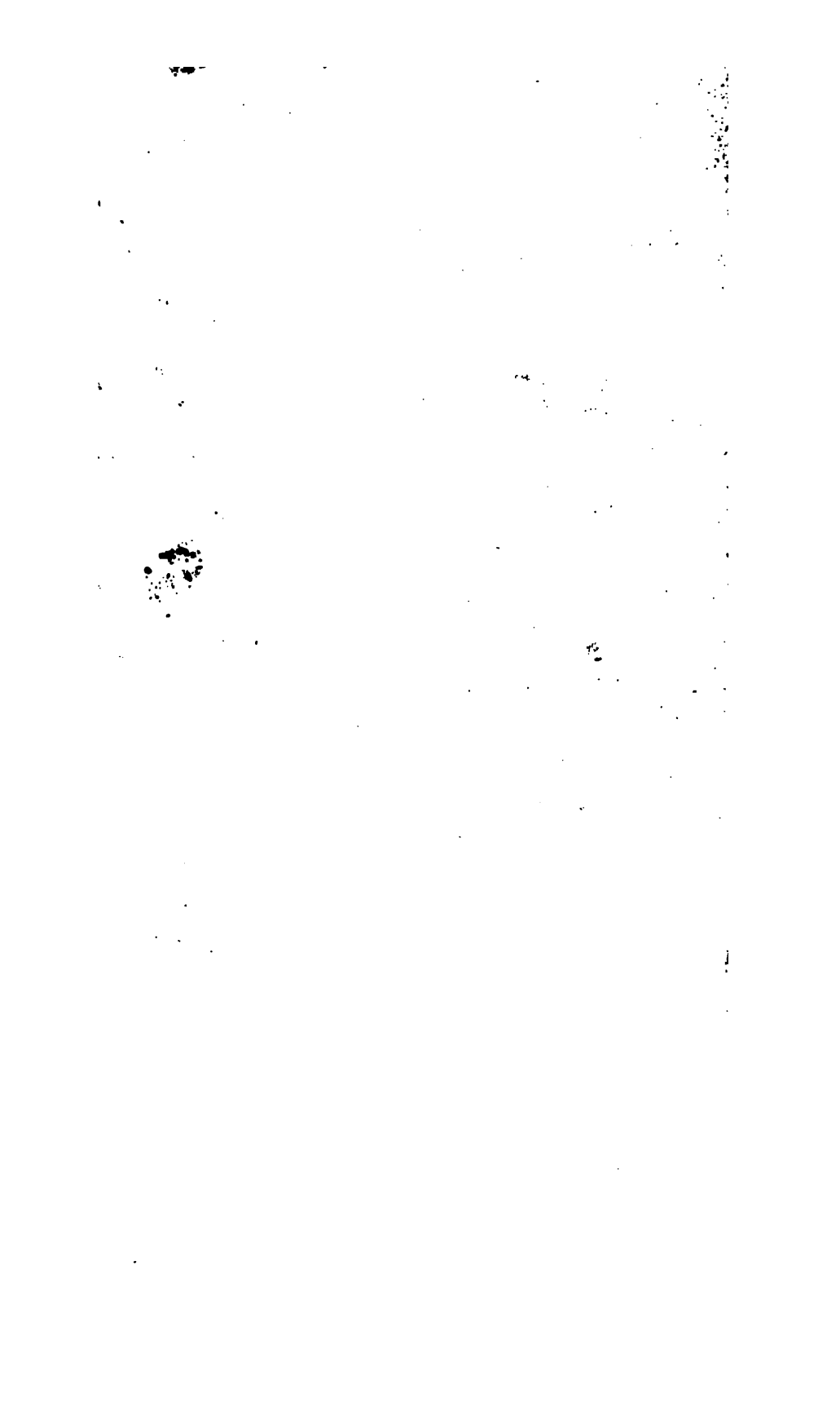
It belongs not to this place to praise the dead. And of him a worthier memorial is written in a life, uniformly marked with traits that secured to him the respect and highest

confidence of all, and it is treasured up imperishably in faithful hearts. With what purity and uprightness of private life, with what conscientiousness and fidelity in numerous public trusts, he had his walk before God, is known to you all. The kind Neighbor, the useful Citizen, the trusty Counsellor, the judicious Friend in whom the widow and the fatherless often confided, the devoted and efficient public Officer, he filled all stations with strict integrity of purpose. Sincere in his manners, frank in his address, firm and faithful in his friendships, how many had he bound, to his generous, manly heart. By his large circle of acquaintances, by us of this society with whom he worshipped, by numerous public institutions of which he was an active member and supporter, by this city—its able executive head—too deeply for our poor words to describe, will his loss be felt. Of his own family and kindred we may not here speak. Sacred is the sanctuary of their grief. Hearts there are that feel for them,

and prayers there are that go up to Him, who pitieth his stricken children.

And now, brethren, in the midst of his strength, and in the very height of his usefulness he has been in a moment called away; by one of those visitations of God's most holy hand to which we are at any time exposed, and which only five days since we should have thought would have fallen upon any one of us, as soon as upon him. To those many names, fresh in your memories, of those who have here been suddenly taken hence, yet another is now added. O that we were wise, that we understood this, that we would consider our latter end.







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